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ABSTRACT

This issue of the "Indiana English Journal" discusses the teaching of writing and contains suggestions that will help improve students' writing. The essays contained in this monograph include "The Writer as Writer and Critic: How to Be a Schizophrenic and Still Not End Up in Bedlam," "A Teacher's Mini-Glossary of Writing Techniques," "Film--A Way to Learn to Write," "Models for Writing Conferences," "The Teaching of Composition through Textless Books," and "The Wire Game: Classroom Interaction for Oral and Written Communication." (RB)

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THE WRITER AS WRITER AND CRITIC: How to Be a Schizophrenic and Still Not End Up in Bedlam.

In this day of writing as quick copy, the easy essay, and instantaneous free association of words, I'm still worried about what students do after the first draft. In some ways, the teaching of writing has become too easy; in other and more important ways it has become more difficult than ever.

As a writer myself, who frequently falters through the process of moving words along a page from manuscript to typewritten copy to print, I have learned to a modest degree what the steps are in the process of writing. It's a laborious, time-consuming, but exhilarating act. And I know that any person who stops after writing the first draft has never learned what writing is all about.

Much of what I see in the English classrooms that passes for instruction in writing serves to get the kids to write only a first draft. The teachers use situations somewhat like these: study a picture of a person and write about him; go to a full length commercial movie and report about it; see a short movie and tell what you think about it; watch a TV program and make a written response; compose a letter to the editor of your school newspaper or of the local newspaper; read a poem and respond to it or create your own poem; listen to a record that you enjoy and tell how you feel about it; observe life around you and report what you see, feel, smell, taste, or hear; or just sit down for 20 minutes or so and write anything that comes to your mind. And so on.

These activities are all to the good, but teachers seldom go beyond what the kids produce as a result of these assignments. And no matter how much fun they are for student and teacher, these are only first drafts. The last situation listed for instance—sit down and write for 20 minutes or so—is aimed only at persuading someone that the physical act of writing on paper is not quite as painful as it appears—if he'll only get started. It is not meant to lead the student to a fully realized piece of writing.

What does the writer do after he has produced a first draft? He steps away from himself as a writer and assumes the role of critic, the position of disinterested editor. He becomes almost antagonistic toward this first-draft piece of writing and asks of it questions like these: Are the ideas intelligible? Are the examples concrete, pertinent, and accurate? Do the assumptions proceed from convincing evidence? Are the sentences varied? Are they as forceful and elegant as they can be? Is the mood sustained? Are the words precise? As I read, can I move from idea to idea and image to image without interruption? Is the audience firmly in mind? Is the structure discernible and appropriate? Is the command of mechanics (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, conventional English usage, and format) perfect? Has the writer said something amusing, interesting, or worthwhile?

If the writer can become a critic at this point, can indeed become another person, a schizophrenic, then he has hopes of becoming a competent and even successful writer—and not end up in Bedlam, or in Bellevue. Far from it. He may even come to that sane state of mind in which, through writing, he is able to arrive at order and even elegance in his disordered universe.

But how do we help the beginning writer become aware of this process and want to follow it? How, in other words, do we help the student talk about his writing?

Those teachers, who, I believe, spend most of their time with the concerns for spelling, punctuation, and gross usage problems, like run-on sentences and fragments, do so because they're not confident in their ability to ask the crucial questions which deal with how to revise first-draft writing. There are other concerns which are important for the teaching of writing—like prewriting, finding a reason for writing, and discovering one's voice—but those are other topics. What I'm concerned with here are the kinds of questions the writer must ask himself as critic. Those questions the teacher must make the student aware of. And those questions which the beginning author must attempt to resolve if he is ever going to produce writing of which he is proud.

I'm sure you can think of other questions but here are some that I have found useful for the beginning writer.

1. Word and Sentence Concerns. Writing is fiddling with words, separately and in groups. As warmup exercises, students might spend much time manipulating words and sentences, initially those written by other students and even by professionals and later those produced by themselves.

Here is part of an exercise that I use to help students become conscious of how words and sentences operate. I run off openers to pieces of writing by students—some effective, others not so striking—and ask the students to rewrite them so a reader's attention would be caught. They are directed to add words or clauses to accomplish this and to leave the good ones alone. In either case, they must explain why they did or did not revise the sentences.

a. My eyes opened.
b. It was Wednesday night.
c. It was our first day.
d. The gerbil was dead.
e. I finally allowed myself to hold another man's child.
f. Today I saw six people murdered.

Most people see quickly that nothing happens in sentences a, b, and c. If no student is aware of it, I point out that in sentences b and c the expletive "it" and a form of the verb "to be" make up a particularly deadly way to start a sentence. Although they usually appreciate the fact that sentences d, e, and f catch the mind and heart of the reader, they find it more difficult to find the words for telling why these openers create an immediate tension.

As the students revise the prosaic sentences, many of them take a delight in turning them into something new. Here are some student revisions of the first three sentences:

a. My eyes opened, and all I could see was an enormous row of teeth.
b. It was Wednesday night, and I was being followed down the street by a hunchbacked midget.
c. It was our first day outside of prison in forty-seven years.

In another assignment, I give the students sentences to revise by cutting out fussy or ornate adjectives and adverbs, and by adding more precise words as they see fit. Again, the students must be prepared to justify what they do.

a. I blankly stared out into the distant sea.
b. Restlessly, Peter shuffled some papers around before reaching for his library book.
c. He would be a sturdy, robust child with ample arms and legs ready to race down the beach at breakneck speed.

The students learn to respond to questions about the sentences like these: In a, isn't a stare already "blank"? If Peter shuffles some papers, doesn't this show that he is nervous or "restless"? And if the child is "sturdy," then mustn't he also be "robust" with "ample" arms and legs?

There are many other ways to make students aware of how words react with one another in writing. They can take traditional expressions like axioms or epigrams and revise them. Thus Thoreau's statement "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation." may become "Many people lead lives of quiet happiness. What is called lack of ambition is hidden happiness." And of course attention to figurative language always works.

One of the best ways to make students aware of sentence concerns is to give them sentence combining problems. A good place to start is with Frank O'Hare's research report number 15 for the National Council of Teachers of English, *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction.* If you haven't had any work with transformational grammar and its pedagogical applications, then this monograph explains what sentence combining is and suggests exercises that have been successful with junior high school pupils. The same principles apply to sentences used with younger or more mature students

Once you realize how sentence combining works, you can break down complex student or professional sentences into basic sentences and let your students wrestle with the problems of recombining them. Here, for instance, are the basic sentences derived from the opening complex sentence of the John Steinbeck short story "Flight."

Derived Basic Sentences

The Torres family had their farm. It was about fifteen miles below Monterey. It was on the coast. The coast was wild. The farm was of acres. The acres were few. The acres were sloping.

The acres were above a cliff. The cliff dropped. It was to the reefs. The reefs were brown. The cliff dropped. It was to the waters. They were of the ocean. The waters were white. The waters were hissing.

Original Complex Sentence

About fifteen miles below Monterey, on the wild coast, the Torres family had their farm, a few sloping acres above a cliff that dropped to the brown reefs and to the hissing white waters of the ocean.

As the students combine sentences from student and professional models, they will come to respect the ways in which accomplished writers create sentences and will develop confidence in their ability to create varied sentences.

2. Observation Concerns. Successful writers observe what happens around them and use words to describe their images, thoughts, or feelings so that those who read their work can recreate the experiences evoked by the words. Writers train themselves to do this. Inexperienced writers may also learn the process but only through much practice and a great deal of wasted motions.

Here are some examples of student attempts at writing their own fresh observations:

a. A single moment, uniquely personal, can be frozen forever in the biting whiteness of the cold.
b. Winds are blowing, green grass is growing. Everything seems so perfect. Friendly smiles, cheerful faces all seem to welcome one to a place of happiness.
c. My sailboat, overturned on picnic benches against the winter, looks helpless, capsized against the snow.
d. Loneliness is damp. It clings to the bones, and the ache drips in rhythmic patterns from every part of your being, never stopping until it reaches your heart.

At first, most students describe with abstract and general words, relating phrases like "frozen forever," "biting whiteness of the cold," and "green grass is growing." But once in a while, each will hit upon a fresh moment and find the right words to evoke it: a sailboat overturned on picnic benches, "capsized against the snow" and "Loneliness is damp."

I ask my students to select one observation that seems apt and to expand it, either in prose or in poetry. Here is an expanded version of observation a, "Loneliness is damp."

Loneliness is a seeping ache,
  hanging shroudlike and grey.
It creeps through the veins,
  slowly leperous and
    pall-like,
  draping the heart
    in a damp tomb.

Like many adolescents, the writer has a fascination with loneliness and the macabre. but she has certainly extended a metaphor consistently and used words in a precise way to create an identifiable tone.

3. Audience Concerns. If we don't define the writing problem of "audience" in abstract terms but help to create situations for students to write pieces **to** real people or **for** real people—other than the generalized "teacher-reader"—then students have little problem with finding a personal style to match a particular audience.

One successful assignment for helping students identify an audience is the "gripe" piece. When students complain about something in writing, they are forced to direct their writing to a specific person. One student wrote to a teacher, complaining about course requirements. Another wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, praising a gasoline station attendant for going out of the way to help her find a store. And another student wrote a letter to his principal outlining the reasons for a student smoking lounge in the school. All knew exactly who their audiences were.

Whenever a student starts a first draft, I suggest that he write at the top of his paper the word "Audience" and then describe the audience for whom the writing is intended. When he has finished, he should check the description of his audience and ask himself whether or not he has kept it in mind throughout his draft.

4. Design Concerns. Structure and design concerns are among the most difficult for both the teacher of writing and the student to solve.

Design concerns are partially resolved in the early stages of composing if the writer has spent considerable time thinking through what he wants to write. But, as we come to learn, the writer doesn't know exactly what he is going to create until he has actually produced it. Only then can he read over the entire manuscript and begin to make judgments—objectively and again almost antagonistically—about the structure of the piece.

I believe that discrete exercises won't help the student of writing learn how to resolve design problems. He should read widely and observe how other writers have solved structure difficulties. But the teacher should suggest questions for the student that point toward resolutions of such problems. These are some questions that might be raised: Is that the most effective opening? Would the paper be stronger if you cut out that section? Or moved it here? Shouldn't that idea be expanded? Or condensed? Haven't you spent too much time on that topic? And too little on that one? Does your conclusion follow from the rest of the paper? Look again at your beginning to see how the conclusion might be strengthened.

5. Concern for Mechanics. For the student of writing who spends most of his energy with the real concerns of writing—words, sentences, observation, audience, and design—the concern for mechanics will assume its proper place. Certainly the writer must spell correctly, use appropriate punctuation, wed his usage to the style of language he chooses, and follow manuscript conventions like typing his copy double spaced on one side of the paper and using wide margins all around. We all want the beginning writer to produce what the professional editor calls "clean copy."

And I've found that most students will begin to turn out error-free, clean copy as soon as what they write comes from them and is not a result of an artificial teacher-initiated assignment. In the past, when I set up assignments for which students produced stilted, over-generalized prose, they expected me to proofread their manuscripts, which I generally did. Now I think I know why they didn't proofread their manuscripts. First, they had been trained to expect me and other teachers to proofread for them, and second they had no interest in revising papers which they thought had little relationship to what they enjoyed in life.

I'm not saying that beginning writers will automatically take care of all mechanical errors in their compositions. What I am suggesting is that if they write pieces to which they are personally committed, chances are they will want to correct mechanical errors in the final copy. As they become aware of the practical need for clean copy, they will use the dictionary and thesaurus for the spelling, capitalization, meaning, and syllabication of words. And they'll want to check rhetoric books for proper punctuation and usage conventions. As they do this, they'll find themselves becoming responsible writers, at least as far as written mechanics are concerned.

6. Concern for Life, Excitement, Caring. If the beginning writer learns to handle some of the concerns I've mentioned but produces writing without vitality, he may not even know the thrill of writing pieces which excite him and move others.

The only way I know of making students aware of this almost indefinable quality is by pointing out what I consider passion, wonder, and grace in the writing of students and professionals and praising it. When the student sees others opening themselves to experiences that matter and reporting them honestly, then he is almost always willing to open himself up, too.

Here are some selections from student writing which may illustrate what I mean. Many times the total piece of writing moves me, and I make a special point of examining the reasons why I became emotionally involved and encourage the students to examine reasons also. Other times single sentences or phrases are honest and moving. Here are a few that impressed me:

a. "Yeah Lou, but that's the name of the game. Like you never were lucky. I've heard . . . we've all heard the old stories about you and your big games." It was the truth. Lou used to be lucky; the games were big, and the stories were old.

b. This is the way I want to remember him, the right way he would want me to. He's my grandfather, never-changing, always the same with his snowy white hair, slowly receding, and his flushed pink cheeks propping up a hearty smile.

c. The day the paperhangers came, Daddy had taken our crayons out and let us draw pictures all over the old paper. He even helped us, getting the high places we couldn't reach. We screamed and laughed, scribbling brightly all over the wall.

Nobody who knows ever said that writing was easy. That's why so few people ever write: it's too hard. But even if it is difficult, beginning writers can learn to go beyond a first draft, can step outside of themselves to wrestle with the concerns that matter to accomplished writers, and can learn to a considerable degree what the process of writing is all about. As they come to accept this process, they may know the reward of seeing their written words give shape and meaning to their personal worlds. They may even feel akin to Carl Sandburg, who wrote this late in life.

> I should like to think that as I go on writing there will be sentences truly alive, with verbs quivering, with nouns giving color and echoes. It could be, in the grace of God, I shall live to be eighty-nine, as did Hokusai (an Oriental painter), and speaking my farewell to earthly scenes, I might paraphrase: "If God had let me live five years longer I should have been a writer."

A MINI-REVIEW

Robert M. Pirsig. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* William Morrow & Company, 1974. $7.95. 412 pp.

Unlikely as it may seem from the title, the book has much to do with composition: as an academic discipline, as a vocation, as "An Inquiry into Values" (the subtitle).

The autobiographical "I" of this work was once a teacher of college composition. He prefers to call it rhetoric. During those years he went mad.

It wasn't the strain of tutoring the unlettered that committed him; yet it was his struggle to reinstate rhetoric as a means of attaining the Truth, the Good—"Quality," as he terms it—that led to his breakdown.

The book mingles two sorts of writing: a first person narrative in the present which unfolds as the speaker and his son travel across America on a well-maintained B.M.W.; and a highly philosophical discourse which the narrator describes as "a sort of Chautauqua . . . an old time series of popular talks intended to edify and explain . . . ."

The book chronicles a quest. Like Thoreau in his boat on the Concord and Merrimac rivers, these cyclists are riding farther than any conveyance can take them. The narrator is pursuing his ghost, Phaedrus, who never came out of the asylum. The Chautauqua, we learn, is an elaboration upon Phaedrus' imperfectly-remembered ideas.

It was Phaedrus who taught rhetoric: "Poor rhetoric, once learning itself, now becomes reduced to the teaching of mannerisms and forms . . . for writing, as if these mattered. Five spelling errors, . . . **or** one error of sentence completeness, **or** . . . ."

Pirsig strives "to resuscitate the dead art" of rhetoric—to maintenance more than motorcycles. It takes 412 pages to explain, but it is worth the while.

—Peter A. Scholl

A. L. LAZARUS

A Teacher's Mini-Glossary of Writing Techniques

BALANCING Contemporary writers tend to resist classical rhetoric, although the occasional use of parallelism to clarify an ambiguous sentence containing two or more verbal or prepositional phrases does work.

BUILDING CUMULATIVE SENTENCES Modern writers, along with quite a few ancients, build some of their most effective sentences by adding various kinds of phrases (prepositional, participial, absolute) as concrete modifiers of what is introduced only skeletally in the initial clause. For exampie, here is Hemingway: "The fall came early that year, the leaves turning flame red." And here is Updike: "Piet had grown to love this house, its rectangular low rooms, its . . . chair rails beaded by hand, . . . the windows flecked with oblong bubbles and tinged with lavender . . . ." (See, further, Francis Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric.)*

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WORD Students need to learn that choosing the right word has less to do with notions of "correct vs. incorrect" and more with what is appropriate to a total context (purpose, persona, audience). While cultivating that sensitivity, students will find a dictionary of synonyms indispensable. In fact, some teachers find it useful to involve their students in finger exercises with a thesaurus, making sure to provide also, of course, specimen contexts.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING Contemporary writers tend to resist this classical mode of developing a paragraph, although it can still be useful in feature articles that require extended definitions. It can also be useful in those personal pieces that re-create milestones in personal growth, contrasting "then" and "now."

CONNECTIONS, MAKING Aside from such counter-word transitions as *however, moreover,* and the like, repeating a key word or idea previously established—or if not repeating it summarizing it in some such phrase as "this idea" or "this event" or "this dilemma"—strengthens a paper's logical flow.

CONTROLLING TONE Students writing editorials, letters to the editor, and other opinion pieces aiming to convince or persuade can end up antagonizing readers unless the instructor devotes some of the assignment-making episode to stressing the consequences of tone-of-voice in any piece of writing. (See, further, Jenkinson and Seybold, "Chapter 8," *Writing as a Process of Discovery.)*

CREATING A PERSONA Many students enjoy the kind of assignment in which the instructor says "Make like a reporter" or "Make like a novelist" or "Make like a ————————." In describing an event to an audience, the role the writer plays (patriot, rebel, critic—whatever) can make all the difference. A student may later switch a role deliberately (taking a cue from Moreno-type psychodrama) to

discover what it feels like to be speaking about a given event or issue from a different prejudice or reference-frame. (See Walker Gibson, *Persona;* also J. N. Hook et al., *Representative Performance Objectives . . . .)*

CREATING TENSION In writing personal pieces, students can create a suspensive atmosphere by juxtaposing two values or value-systems (e.g., to kill or not to kill an animal) that compete for the narrator's acceptance. Tension can similarly be achieved by juxtaposing antithetical words and ideas.

DEFINING Besides using dictionary approaches to defining (i.e., classifying, listing properties, etc.) students can be usefully exercised in such other approaches as showing or pointing, telling how something works ("operationalism"), citing examples, citing causes, and **rendering**. (See, further, Harold Martin and Richard Ohmann, *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition.)*

DESCRIBING See RENDERING and BUILDING CUMULATIVE SENTENCES.

DOCUMENTING To begin with, unless the documentary paper treats a topic the student is really interested in (and is willing to write in addition to, rather than instead of, a series of shorter papers), its educative value remains suspect. To paraphrase William Carlos Williams, so much depends on the writer's interest. Formal kinds of documentaries—those with elaborate Latinate footnotes—appear to have been abandoned, moreover, in favor of the more informal "feature articles" inspired by the writer's interest in a current issue, fad, phenomenon, or personality. In such a paper the writer still acknowledges indebtedness to authoritative sources, of course, but cites this documentation (author, title, publisher, date, and page-number) right in the main body of the text. (For criteria concerning the student's motivation in writing documentaries and other genres, see Bernarr Folta and Richard Trent, *Discovering Motives in Writing;* also Stephen Judy and Gilbert Tierney, "The Assignment Makers," *English Journal,* February, 1972.)

EMPHASIZING In any piece of writing the actual space devoted to a point (topic, person, place, event, issue) as compared with the space devoted to anything else results in an emphasis, intended or not. Sensitive emphasis-producing spots, moreover, remain at beginnings and ends of utterances, paragraphs, and pieces. To emphasize particular words and phrases many good writers tend to avoid italics (underscoring) and exclamation points, preferring rather to add some such emphasis-markers as "do" (does, did). For example, instead of "*This makes* a difference!"—"This does make a difference."

EXPLAINING In any list of techniques for generating clear exposition perhaps none is more useful than the technique of "saying who is doing what." Such an agent-verb construction can clarify an ambiguity like "the correction of the administration" into some such clearer utterance as "the administrators corrected the voters" or "the voters corrected the administrators." Notice that despite pedagogical strictures against using the passive voice, an utterance like "the administration was corrected by the voters" works quite clearly not only to explain who was doing what but also to take the curse off naming

certain administrators if the writer chooses not to name them. (See, further, the entries "nounification" and "noun-banging" in the Lazarus and Smith, *A Glossary of Literature and Composition.)*

HOOKING THE READER Among the various "narrative hook" devices, the arresting question (e.g., "When was the last time you used your legs instead of your car to get to your shopping center?") often engages the reader. Some students, who resist that device, respond to the challenge of opening a piece—especially a personal essay—with an appropriate anecdote or personal experience.

KEYNOTING In quoting celebrities and authorities (celebrated or not), students should be taught more than just the mechanics (indenting, single-spacing, and the like). To maintain logical flow, many good writers often introduce quotations with a summary statement—a kind of keynote that emphasizes how the quotation will support the quoter's main drift.

ILLUSTRATING WITH EXAMPLES In annotating students' papers, some instructors resort to using, at vulnerable spots in the margins, a rubber stamp that reads YOU NEED AN EXAMPLE. Less plastic, more humane, feedback is reflected in some such interrogative annotation as "Can you clarify by giving an example?" Sensitive to the effectiveness of the inductive sequence in certain papers, moreover, talented instructors go a step further—advise students who do use examples to use them first and to defer the statement containing the "point" to a follow-up position.

INTENDING (settling on a purpose) The actual effect a piece has on readers may or may not be the effect the writer intended, as the New Critics used to tell us. Students still need to be made aware of this phenomenon, as Morris Finder observes in "An Analysis of the Task," *Journal of Reading* (December, 1969). In each piece they write, students should of course attend to a primary purpose (e. g., to inform, to entertain, to convince, to persuade, to express a feeling, whatever), to say nothing here of addressing a particular audience. But a secondary or concomitant purpose is also appropriate. A piece of writing may well aim to entertain while it informs, for example, or to persuade while it entertains. Students should learn the difference, incidentally, between convincing (winning the reader to the writer's conviction) and persuading (causing the reader to act on that conviction). Thus, if the purpose of an editorial is to persuade, the piece should end with a specific plan of, and call to, action.

MAKING A POINT Many students need to be disabused of the notion that narrative-descriptive discourse is in itself an essay. An informal (or "personal" or "familiar") essay worthy of that tag makes a point—or at least suggests a main point, often along with one or two corollaries. As for the formal essay, especially the explication, the point ("controlling statement," "thesis statement") is of course indispensable and should almost always be regarded as a prerequisite to writing the paper itself. Students need to be reminded that such a control is at bottom a statement of opinion, moreover, not a statement of fact. Indeed, in an explication if the point is too factual—too close to the *donnee*—it can't be very interesting or worth writing about. Thus, to say "Pip's experiences parallel several of the

author's," for example, is too close to the facts one can find in any biography of Dickens. A more interesting thesis to develop and support might be some such thesis as this: "Pip's behavior suggests that his values were probably rooted in an ambivalent kind of idealism."

MAKING METAPHORS Advising students to resist making metaphors altogether (perhaps because of the danger of mixing them or—even worse—making a comparison manque) is after all irresponsible. Perhaps more responsible teachers involve their students in discriminating between less imaginative and more imaginative metaphors—without stressing the trivial distinction, incidentally, between metaphors and similes. Given the following two comparisons, for example, "The boy looked like a man" and "The boy looked like a bulldozer," the student should identify the second as the more imaginative on the criteria of (a) actual dissimilarity of the two elements compared and (b) "right surprise" or a surprisingly credible single aspect of similarity.

OUTLINING In the spirit of the times, teachers and students confronting traditional emphases on outlining tend to feel it has been oversold. Outlining of various kinds should probably be reserved for some few of the more formal genres. Requiring an outline for the more personal genres often diminishes one's zest for the whole experience, although such "creative" persons as novelists and cinema and TV script writers do not feel affronted when asked to "submit an outline." But even for a formal explication, a useful outline need not consist of anything more than a few short statements (and a short-statement outline is almost always more meaningful than a topic outline) in answer to a thesis question—some such question as "How do we know this?" or "What are these?"—which one puts to the thesis statement, much like the match one puts to a firecracker to get it off the ground. At least, some such short-statement outline can contribute more to the logical flow of an explication than can the honorific (and all too meaningless) Aristotelian tripod, "Introduction, Body, Conclusion."

PARAGRAPHING Instructors are frequently asked, "How long should a paragraph be?" and "Does it have to start with a topic sentence?" An approach that takes care of both these quandaries at once is to involve students in understanding a paragraph as a bundle of answers to one topic question (not necessarily a declaration) whether stated or implied. Once that topic question is identified and articulated the task is easy: a paragraph needs no more or no fewer sentences than those that answer the topic question—let the word-length fall where it may.

PROOFREADING Students should be required to proofread their papers before handing them in. Reading one's paper aloud works well toward that end (see PUNCTUATING, below). Some instructors use proofreaders' marks in marginal annotations of students' papers (thus paying a subtle compliment) even if also insisting that the student learn what these marks signal, respond to them in a revision, and demonstrate increasing responsibility in proofing papers before handing them in.

PUNCTUATING Students learn to use punctuation, especially the comma, reasonably well when they are involved in reading their papers aloud. "As you read aloud," the instructor may well advise, "place a comma wherever the sense makes you pause within a sentence; and at the end of a sentence, place a period or any other appropriate end-mark(s). Wherever you do not pause, or do not intend for your reader to pause, do not put in a comma or any other mark of punctuation." Notice that that rule also takes care of correctly punctuating restrictive and non-restrictive utterances—automatically.

RENDERING This technique is also known as "showing rather than telling." It prefers direct rather than indirect discourse—not "Mary called John a nasty name" but "Mary said, "John—you beast!" In expository discourse—as distinguished from dialogue—to render is to supply concrete images—appeals to the senses: for example, instead of "pungent odors of spices" some such phrase as "odors of pepper and nutmeg."

REVISING The author of *A Farewell to Arms* rewrote its ending seventeen times, as Carlos Baker reports in *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (p.97). In their journals many writers reveal that as a basic discipline of their craft, they systematically make many revisions. This phenomenon is often forgotten as much by teachers as by students, if one is to judge by the assumption implicit in the practice of returning a single draft with a "final grade." The more enlightened instructor involves students in writing several drafts of a paper, withholds grading but annotates preliminary and intermediate drafts with questions designed to elicit from the student more and more imaginative improvements. Such work in progress may be collected in individual "cumulative folders," to which the student has access until the end of the semester. Revisions can also be elicited in student "peer critiquing" in small groups and in pairs provided the latter agree to be responsible. (See, further, Ken Macrorie, *Uptaught;* and James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse.)*

SPELLING Except for professional writers and teachers of "creative writing," who tend to regard as trivial the whole fuss over spelling, most instructors assume—no doubt, soundly—that a misspelled piece of writing, especially a letter, does indeed look disastrously illiterate. But the same instructors may also act on the misguided assumption, alas, that "rules" and large-group drills can improve the skills of individuals. Yet for just about a hundred years investigators have exposed such an assumption—have exposed as practically "zero" the amount of carryover of such group activities (and of the more complicated "rules") to individual mastery.

According to a Purdue survey conducted by Rozanne Knudson and others (and reported in the NCTE *Councilgram*, November, 1967), the following conclusions were received from almost 500 of the nation's leading instructors: (1) Many a student who makes 100% on a whole-class list or test on Friday misspells some of the same words in his individual writing a few days later. (2) Except for the few rules that allow a minimum of exceptions (like "i before e except after c") the Latinate and the "prelinguistic" rules are a waste of time—if only because of the intricate qualifiers and the long lists of exceptions

(which really do not "prove" the rule but only test it—in the primitive sense of *proban* and *probare*—and find it wanting). (3) Many of the two hundred words most frequently misspelled (often printed on inside covers of handbooks) are also exceptions to phonemic/graphemic correspondence rules, even if the latter hold good for most words in the English lexicon. But such correspondences remain far from "optimal" (Noam Chomsky's epithet) even for the very few teachers and students who have mastered them. (4) The teachers' canvasses (among them, some professional writers) revealed that they themselves rely, in their own writing, mainly on mnemonics (e. g., "put some IRON in envIRONment"). (5) The same teachers found that the mnemonics suggested to students evaporate as fast as "rules"; that mnemonics prove most effective when the student is involved in dreaming up some of his own, once the teacher "models" a few; that spelling remains, in the end, an individual skill; that many a student demonstrates mastery only after a long period of keeping a log of his own "demons" along with his own mnemonics. (For a list of the most frequently misspelled words, as determined by the Dale/Chall researches, along with some suggestive models for making mnemonics, see the "Spelling" article in the Lazarus and Smith *Glossary.)*

TIGHTENING To heighten readers' interest, writers usually cut whatever seems dispensable, and they recast circuitous utterances to make them more direct. Teachers can set good examples in their own writing and speaking by reducing their own redundancies (like "bibliography of books" and "vocabulary words"), by cutting deadwood (like "classroom situation") and what Ken Macrorie calls "Engfish" (e. g., "in the area of"); by eliminating unnecessary *who's, that's,* and *whiches;* by recasting *there is* constructions unless the writer deliberately chooses to delay naming the agent. (See, further, Ken Macrorie's chapter "Tightening" in *Telling Writing.)*

ADVISOR

I called him to conference. He came rather meekly.
He was sorry, he said, to have gummed up the works.
He said he'd been partying, several times weekly,
He'd return to the books and break with the jerks!

Things went so well, there was no need he linger.
We shook on it then, but I don't understand:
He passed me today and gave me the finger—
Who only yesterday gave me his hand!

—*Elmer Brooks*

R. W. REISING

"Back to Basics in Composition . . . Huh?"

The "Back to Basics" movement that is sweeping the country is about to unnerve many in our profession, but composition teachers are sure to be among those most discombobulated. They sense that, kicking and screaming, they'll soon be dragged back to the dullness of Warriner's, traditional grammar, and **who-whom** drills. The Golden Age is over, they fear. In disguise, "Back to Basics" will be "Back to the Dark Ages," they predict—parsing, pigeonholing, and pontificating.

They needn't worry, however. If they keep their composure, the progress of recent years doesn't have to be lost. When perplexed administrators or irate parents descend upon them, they can placate many an inquiring mind by citing half-a-dozen truths concerning the composing process. A nasty confrontation can end in pleasantries if they'll simply recall the handful of points outlined below. No well-intentioned administrator or parent would dare deny their validity:

1. People learn to write by writing. No amount of lecturing on composition, no amount of drilling on points of usage will improve writing skills; only practice—trial and error—will. Feedback and response are the key, as James Moffett says.[1] Once a student places words on paper, he needs only reaction—from his teacher, from his classmates, from anyone—to determine whether his communication has been effective. The choices for which he's opted can be deemed good, bad, or indifferent only if there is somebody, or a bunch of somebodies, to conclude "Yes, I like that phrase" or "Maybe *beautiful* would be a better word than *cool*" or "Ugh! You surely are cynical." Listening to lectures on how to compose, circling *lie* rather than *lay*, placing one line under phrases and two under clauses won't improve anyone's facility with a pencil; only action and reaction will.

2. Grammar study does not improve writing skills. It belongs in the English curriculum, certainly. Anyone who says otherwise is foolish indeed. But studying any description, new or old, of how English works won't help a student with his writing proficiency. Perhaps it should, but it doesn't. Research is abundant as well as indisputable on the point. *Research in Written Composition*, published 12 years ago by NCTE, and two more recent volumes, *Creative Approaches to the Teaching of English: Secondary* (Itasca, Illinois: Peacock Publishers, 1974) and *Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1974), provide especially convincing proof that mastery of a grammatical system, even a linguistically based one, isn't tantamount to mastery of written discourse.

3. Writing can be fun. In fact, if students are to be expected to approach it zestfully, it had best be something other than pure pain. Unfortunately, for a lot of adolescents the 500-word essay is just that—pure pain—and an instructor who doesn't prepare his charges well for such an assignment is inviting nothing but insurrection or insanity (probably both!). Other types of communication thus have a real place in the

classroom; poetry, journals, photo essays, commercials, jokes, and a multitude of "unconventional" forms of composition (even graffiti!) provide an excellent prelude to or reinforcement for essay-writing skills.[2] They're all enjoyable, and they all teach adolescents something about controlling language—and that's what composition programs are supposed to do.

4. Every writing assignment carries with it not one but three teaching opportunities. Half-a-century ago, composition teachers gave all their energies to paper-grading. Once an assignment had been made, theirs was a simple life—waiting and evaluating, to put the point poetically. Not so with today's teachers, however. They realize that, like baseball players, they get three strikes, one as good as another. They have an opportunity to teach writing skills *before, during,* and *after* the composition process. Prewriting and laboratory sessions can be just as productive, they realize, as time spent with the completed products. James R. Squire, formerly Executive Secretary for NCTE and now a ranking official with Ginn and Company, hits the nail on the head when he argues that the wise teacher does not neglect either "what happens before pupils write . . ." or laboratory situations, "allowing the teacher time to move around the class, conferring with individuals as a need arises, helping each class member with his own individual problems, at the time when he most needs help, at the time when he is actually composing."[3]

5. A lot of red-penciling does not lead to a lot of writing improvement. Phlebotomy belongs to centuries past, not to the current one. Humanity's in, bloodletting's out—and for the best of reasons. Research provides irrefutable evidence that the intensive evaluation of a composition, the "marking of every error and the writing of detailed comments," does nothing other then submerge the writer "in a sea of particulars. It forces him to attend to all his missteps at once."[4] Like Rome, good writers aren't built in a day; and, unlike that beautiful city, they have sensitive egos that can easily be damaged. Composition teachers must, therefore, exercise restraint. A handful of well-chosen comments, at least a couple of them ego-building, can go a lot further toward developing writing mastery than can a horde of red scribblings scattered in every nook and crevice of a writer's noblest effort.[5]

6. Effective writing programs have objectives. Without them there is bound to be little or no direction to the instruction and activities—and student frustration looms as a real possibility. What George Hillocks, Jr., sees as necessary for Electives English programs is no less vital for composition programs: "objectives must be valid in terms of theories of the subject matter, appropriate to the interests and abilities of the students involved, and clear enough to permit the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction."[6] Not every student is destined to be a prose master; yet, thanks to sensible and sequentially ordered objectives, none needs to feel so inept with a pencil that he cringes every time the word *composition* reaches his ears.

Likewise, in the months ahead, composition teachers need not tremble when queried about their return to composition basics. Without blinking an eye, they should simply respond, "Back to basics . . . huh? who ever left them?" Citing the six points above is certain to convince many a questioner that they do indeed speak the truth.

NOTES

[1]James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 188-210.

[2]For a useful list of "some neglected forms of composition," see Stephen N. Judy, *Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1974), p. 91.

[3]James R. Squire, quoted in "A New Look at The Teacher of Writing," *Report of the Fourteenth Yale Conference on the Teaching of English*, April 5-6, 1968.

[4]J. Stephen Sherwin, *Four Problems in Teaching English: A Critique of Research*, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969), pp. 163-167.

[5]For a full description of one desirable paper-evaluation technique, see R.W. Reising, "Controlling the Bleeding," *College Composition and Communication*, 24 (February, 1973), pp. 43-44.

[6]George Hillocks, Jr., "The English Teacher as Curriculum Maker," *English Education*, 5 (April/May, 1974), pp. 238-248.

THINGS OF THE MIND

It's bad form, I'm told, to think
of one's students (even those polished,
firm young girls in long hair
and tee shirts) as anything but that;
and especially a married man, they say,
should not look at other women
with anything in mind
except an exchange of ideas.
So I excuse my lust as academic,
try not to notice what
the crossed legs
in the front row reveal,
and wonder how learned
I must get
to stop thinking.

—*Robert Kettler*

JANE BALES

FILM — A Way to Learn to Write

Film study or filmmaking provides help for students in writing compositions or in studying writing samples. Students may argue that they cannot write if they are not inspired; they may also think that to make a film, one simply takes an idea, gets a camera, and starts shooting. Neither is true. Both writing and filmmaking require thought and hard work. Studying or making a short film may provide students with comparisons to writing.

A shot (taken with a single camera in a single position) is a basic unit of film. It is a statement. A sentence makes this same statement in writing. A scene of a film is the paragraph of a story. The plot of the film or story is made up of several scenes. A fade-in may introduce the film or scene as an introduction does for the story or paragraph. A fade-out may close the scene as a conclusion does for the story.

The transition between scenes may be done with fades or dissolves or cuts. The fade, diminishing light, has greater finality. The dissolve is a slower transition indicating a "meanwhile" or "when" in writing. The cut is more abrupt. It requires less connection between scenes. In television programs, cuts are the most frequently used changes in scenes. This is also true of students' writing. They abruptly change from paragraph to paragraph without relating one scene or topic to another. Perhaps this is partially due to the influence of television. Many students have difficulty paragraphing properly. By studying film and writing samples, they can understand the reason they write as they do. They can learn to recognize and write more effective paragraphs with better transitions.

The tempo of the film can be compared to the tempo of the story. Short shots increase the tempo and excitement as short sentences do in a story. (A sample of Hemingway's writing can be used.) Longer shots and sentences slow the pace of the film or story. (A sample of Henry James' writing can be used.)

Point of view can also be compared. Most stories are told in third person just as most films are made from objective camera. The first person point of view could be compared with the subjective camera. (The camera shows what the character sees.) A rack focus may change the point of view or the viewpoint.

Character development can be studied with camera angle. A low shot gives greater height or power to the character. A high angle shot diminishes character. The narrator in a film is similar to the narrator of a story. Dialogue may add to the film or story.

The filmmaker uses an establishing shot to set the scene as a writer does when describing the setting. The filmmaker moves in with medium and close shots as the writer moves in to describe the setting or the character. The motion of the camera—panning, tilting, dollying

shots—can be descriptions of plot or character or setting. Intercutting between two or more scenes in a film may be similar to a writer's parallel construction of two or more scenes or ideas. Following the climax, a writer concludes his story. A filmmaker may conclude with a re-establishing shot.

The mood of the film is determined by focus (soft focus gives a subtle, dream-like quality), by speed of shutter (fast shutter gives slow motion) and camera (moving, fluid camera), by light, by music, and by tempo. Superimposition in film may show thoughts of a person in the present time, or it may indicate a flashback in action or thought.

Details in writing are important; close-ups, inserts, and cut-aways give these important details in film. Tricks in filming are evident as are tricks in writing. A filmmaker can accomplish magic or fantasy or imagination by a single frame. (Pixilation may make objects and people appear or disappear.)

There are other comparisons which can be drawn, depending on the film being studied, the film being made, or the story being written. Visuals have long provided help in writing. Studying the film can help students write stories and understand the stories of others.

If the reader does not understand film terms, *Young Filmmakers* by Larson and Meade (New York: Avon, 1969) has an excellent glossary of film terms.

OXFORD, APRIL 15

The trees are budded,
there is a summer sun;
we go out onto the grass,
circle an oak tree
and talk about poetry.
The girls nestle uneasily,
their skirts too short
for sitting; the boys squint
into the sun, hiding their smiles;
my voice flees upward through
bare branches. We kneel
in the clear light and chat,
while the wind turns
the pages.

—*Robert Kettler*

DENNIS C. CARRITHERS

Models for Writing Conferences

Do we really believe as English teachers that giving a writing assignment, reading the essays laboriously, and handing them back to students with grades or extensive written comments improve student writing? In some cases, perhaps; anything will work some of the time. As an alternative, consider teaching writing through the conference.

The teacher and student sitting down together with a piece of writing in front of them get to the heart of the writing process as they work through writing problems and have a combined investment in the end product. The teacher's role is to diagnose, prescribe with positive feedback, and ultimately to make the student writer confront his own writing problems and find his own solutions.

Feedback

Writing conferences do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in the larger environment of the English classroom and are dependent upon the individual teacher's approach to teaching writing either in specifically designated writing courses or in general or elective English courses. Obviously, the teacher's overall approach to teaching writing and to teaching in general will set the tone for his writing conferences. In fact, the teacher's willingness to confer with students will influence the learning environment.

Some assumptions ought to be made, however, about the teaching atmosphere in which the conference occurs. We will assume that regular writing is done in the class, that students will have frequent writing conferences, that opportunities for trial and error exist without penalty, that students will share what they write with one another, as well as with the teacher, and that they will look to their peers for feedback. Donald Murray in his book *A Writer Teaches Writing* explains these and other aspects of making a classroom a writing workshop or writing laboratory.

Within this framework the teacher conducts writing conferences as a diagnostician who must analyze every piece of writing presented in conferences and provide some intelligible feedback to the student. In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* James Moffett defines feedback as "any information a learner receives as a result of his trial. The information usually comes from his own perception of what he has done." A "trial" in this instance is an attempt to perform some action that leads to learning.

Such feedback can come from students as well as teachers. Moffett finds that students are often more effective than teachers in providing feedback to each other, what he calls "cross-commentary." He states the objective concerning writing in such a classroom:

> Ideally, a student would write because he was interested in saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience. He would write only authentic kinks of discourse such as exist outside of school. A maximum amount of feedback would be provided him in the form of audience response. That is, his writing would be read and discussed by this audience, who would also be the coaches. This response would be candid and specific. Adjustments in language, form, and content would come as the writer's response to his audience's response. Thus instruction would always be individual, relevant, and timely. These are precisely the virtues of feedback learning that account for its great success.

In a classroom that provides for such cross-commentary, the teacher still has a responsibility for providing significant feedback. According to Moffett, "Much depends, of course, on the manner of the teacher, and, curiously enough, if the teacher shifts authority to the peer group, which is where it lies anyway for adolescents, and takes on an indirect role, then his feedback carries greater weight."

Coach and Cure

When we present feedback to students, some teachers refer to our role as that of the doctor who must diagnose a patient's illness and prescribe a cure. Others make the analogy with the coach who objectively analyzes an athlete's performance and suggests improvements. As writer and teacher Donald Murray says in *A Writer Teaches Writing,* "The teacher in the conference is an adviser, a coach, a person who is helping the student to teach himself." Murray suggests that the teacher begin the conference with the question "What is your problem in this paper?" The objective is to get the student to see his own problem and propose his own solution. If the teacher sees that the student is having difficulty finding a solution, he can provide some material, a check list, a paragraph, a text, an example that might help the student see possible solutions. The teacher should guide the student to proficiency at seeing that, as a writer, he has certain problems that any writer has and that he must find his own solutions.

Writing conferences can occur at any place and at any time and can vary in length. They may be in class, in the corridor between classes, in the cafeteria, before school, on the way out of the building, in any place where students talk to teachers. In more formal conferences the teacher should make himself available at regularly scheduled times at a place that offers privacy and quiet where he can sit side by side with the student over a piece of writing. Some teachers use appointment calendars or sign-up sheets that are accessible to students to schedule conferences. Depending on the student's needs, some conferences may last longer than anticipated, but Murray suggests that they usually last no more than ten minutes and that they be focused on a single problem that the teacher must diagnose in a given piece of writing.

Be Positive

Though at times teachers will ask a student to confer on a particular paper or to fulfill a conference obligation, most teachers find that conferences work better when the student initiates them. The teacher may set

the requirement that all students must have a certain number of conferences within a given period of time, such as a quarter or a semester, but the student has the responsibility to schedule one when he desires it. In that case, he will usually have a particular problem or question that he wants to discuss, and the teacher can then act as an audience who will provide helpful response.

The conference should be to the point and concentrate on the writing. It should deal with the writing at hand; both the student and teacher should realize that they are there to work on the task of writing. The teacher's response to the student's writing must vary with the problem involved and the student himself. The quality of the response will depend on the teacher's ability to adjust to each individual student and each individual piece of writing; to quote Moffett, "A response must be real and pertinent to the action, not a standard, 'professional' reaction. Any unvarying response, positive or not, teaches us nothing about the effects of what we have done." The teacher can regard what the student has done well without turning every conference into a praise session. The student writer does not need merely a listener or a sounding board, or a source of constant praise; what he needs is a sympathetic, yet honest responder who is interested in helping the writer improve.

The teacher stresses the positive by extending the student beyond where he was when he came in for the conference. In this idea of extension, we can utilize the maxim of "picking up students where they are." If, through the conference process, the student can identify a problem, find a solution, or discover how he can rewrite a sentence or paragraph, then he has been extended in his awareness of himself as a person going through the writing process. Upon the teacher, then, rests the responsibility for insuring that by the end of the conference the student has something specific that he would not have had without it.

Emphasize Process

What would we think of the hypothetical golf instructor who would assign a beginning golfer twelve rounds of golf over the period of a semester and expect him to learn the game? What would we say if, over that period of time, the instructor never went out on the course with the student, but instead, sat expectantly behind the eighteenth hole, and as the student completed each round of golf, commented on or graded the scoreboard that the student handed in? We would expect that the instructor would prepare the student with some basics such as the proper grip, the balanced stance, the form of the swing and then go out on the course with the student and coach him on the shots while the student hit them. Further, the instructor would have his student work on individual shots by having him hit buckets of balls to refine each part of the game to help the student play an entire round.

Robert Zoellner in the January 1969 issue of *College English* uses the golf instructor analogy to illustrate how English teachers too often fail to work with the student writer through the process of writing, but concentrate on the writing product. In his article, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," Zoellner adapts the discoveries of modern behavioral psychology to the teaching of writing. His comments on

changing the method of teaching writing from the think-write approach now used to a talk-write approach and his suggestions for using immediate, positive reinforcement of desired behavior are instructive for English teachers. If the teacher assigns an essay, comments on it conscientiously with grades or corrections, and hands it back several days later, he is perhaps failing to instruct the student much as did that hypothetical golf instructor. For one thing, the student does not get an immediate response to what he is doing at the time he is doing it, and for another, the product of his work takes precedence over the process. Zoellner writes:

> If we confuse themes with people, and delude ourselves into thinking that we are giving *students* individual attention, it is perhaps because our pervasive, largely unconscious think-write metaphor gives sanction to the equivalence of the *action* of writing with the *artifact* of written words.

In writing conferences we can facilitate the individualization of instruction as a personal, one-to-one exchange between the student who is going through the writing process and the instructor who is coaching him through it. If conferences are held while the student is writing instead of when the product is complete, the teacher can provide immediate instruction. We can work the student through the writing process, to discover where he is doing well, where he needs attention, where he encounters problems, and how he can improve his work.

In this way the writing-teacher can use writing conferences to assist the student through the writing process instead of merely being a critic of the final product.

Exploit Problems

As the student works through the writing process, he needs room to experiment with solutions to his writing problems and with techniques available to him. Writing conferences can provide the vehicle for creating an environment in which the student feels he can try different techniques without being punished if they are not successful. This has been described as the trial-and-error approach in which a student can learn from his errors. In such a situation errors can be exploited as they become means to reach correct behavior. In writing, the designation of trial and error may be too strong, for there are many "right" forms and styles; what is right will be what works. It is for the student to see that he has many alternatives in solving a particular writing problem.

The teacher in the conference can exploit the student's writing problems. What he needs are possible ways to solve a problem at hand. Instead of the grade at the top of the paper that too often reflects negatively where the student has failed, the conference can explore the problems as the student sees them, considers remedies, and rewrites to try once again. This is an environment for positive reinforcement that allows the student to experiment without retribution as he learns to solve his own writing problems.

Having the student keep a record of his conferences can further emphasize his role in his own development. On the inside cover of his writing folder or on a separate form, he can have a positive record of what was

discussed at each conference and what problems were identified. If the student keeps the record himself, he has to summarize what occurred during the conference and thus he comes away with one or several perceptions about his writing.

Writing Conference Models

The following models for writing conferences have been identified by teachers as successful approaches:

1. Student-initiated conference: The student approaches the teacher with a request for a conference. The teacher begins with such a question as "What do you want to talk about?" or "How can I be of help?"

2. First draft or "process" conference: At some early stage in the student's writing process (idea, outline, notes, first draft) the student discusses his work and gets feedback on possible problems or solutions.

3. Problem conference: As a way of getting the student to see his own problems, the teacher asks "What is your problem in this paper?" The conference moves toward asking "How do you propose to solve it?" so that the student confronts alternatives.

4. Rewrite conference: A follow-up to an earlier conference from which the student went away with some ideas on how to rewrite and now gets feedback that helps him evaluate his changes and move toward his final draft.

5. Talk-write conference: Following the model suggested in "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Approach to Writing," by Robert Zoellner *(College English*, January 1969), if the student is having difficulty with a sentence or paragraph, he is asked to verbalize what he wants to say. Once he has spoken clearly his intention, he writes what he said on paper. Emphasis is on having the student write as the conference is being conducted rather than sending him away to write elsewhere. This stresses the process of writing and rewriting and immediate feedback.

6. The teacher initiated conference: The teacher possibly begins with (a) "See me about this" or "Confer please" as written remarks on a piece of writing, or (b) "You haven't been in for a conference. Pick out a piece of writing you have done that you want to discuss or bring in your folder."

7. Feedback of peer response conference: In small groups students have been giving responses to a particular piece of writing. The teacher has sat in on the discussion and in conference attempts to summarize and organize the data he observed. The student gets an appraisal outside of his own perceptions about what the other students said.

8. Dead-end conference: The student discovers that he really does not or cannot write about a particular topic. He either has to find out more about his topic or drop it in favor of one he knows more about or cares about.

RICHARD F. ABRAHAMSON

The Teaching of Composition Through Textless Books

English teachers are forever searching for new methods, techniques, or gimmicks to turn their students on to writing and the composing process. As a secondary English teacher in charge of many of the composition classes, I too began the frantic search for something that would serve as an imagination jogger as well as a vehicle I could use for instructional purposes in teaching writing. With the help of some elementary teachers and children's literature experts, I have found another successful teaching device which I would like to share and add to the growing number of workable approaches available to teachers of composition in the high schools today. The use of textless children's books in the high school composition class seems to me a workable vehicle through which students can learn to write and learn to enjoy the writing process.

To begin with, I hesitate to categorize all those wordless picture books designed for the preschooler as children's books. As you will see later in this article, we do these books an injustice to limit them to this preschool age group. These books have appeal for anyone with imagination.

Textless books provide the teacher with the perfect opportunity for individualizing instruction. When a student is given a set of interrelated pictures, as in textless books, and asked to conjure up his own story based on these pictures, the teacher begins to approach the ultimate in individualization by tapping that particular student's own imagination. There is a good deal of talk today about individual response to literature. It is this individual response to a picture book that we are looking for with textless books. As teachers, we speak of student independence as one of the ultimate goals of language arts, and yet we proceed to shackle the student with our own words and rules or with those of a recognized authority. Textless books let the student throw off the shackles of other people's words and deal with his own responses.

In many high schools today, creative writing and composition are two separate classes. Textless books work for both classes as any good writing instructional device should. The list of books that follows includes suggestions for implementation in both the beginning composition courses as well as in the advanced courses of creative writing, if such a distinction is necessary. The books are not in any special order, and the same book might be very well incorporated into several different units of the same course.

A sure-fire hit as an imagination jogger is Mitsumasa Anno's *Topsy-Turvies: Pictures to Stretch the Imagination.* This is a fine book to use in getting students to free their imaginations. The pictures are weird enough to defy one single interpretation. In fact, the author writes, "In other words, I have purposely added no words to these topsy-turvy pictures of mine so that you can make them mean whatever you want them to mean."

In a somewhat similar vein is a book by Fernando Krahn entitled *Journeys of Sebastian*. The book first shows a child looking at an object in real life. Next the object is shown in the child's mind and begins changing with that child's imagination. Offshoots of these two books might be discussions concerning imagination, fear, and differences in imagination at different age levels. Writing assignments such as keeping a dream diary and recreating favorite childhood fantasies are workable exercises.

Iela and Enzo Mari's book *The Apple and the Moth* is the pictorial study of the life cycle of a moth. The book has great potential when teaching sequence of event, passage of time, and transition in writing. On another level it has implications for teaching reincarnation and might be used for discussions about man's control over his own destiny.

Similar to *The Apple and the Moth* is Martha Alexander's *Out! Out! Out!* A bird enters the home of a little boy and pandemonium begins as the adults try to capture the bird and send it back out the window. Again, the book illustrates sequence of event and transition. It also has potential when discussing and writing humor. Characterization developed by action of the character abounds in this book; therefore, it proves valuable when teaching character development and short story writing.

The Magic Balloon, also by Mari, follows a balloon as it changes shape with each new thing it touches. This book is most effective when teaching students the power adjectives and other modifiers have on the nouns they precede. Exercises here include giving students a list of nouns and asking them to note changes as they describe the nouns with different modifiers.

Hand in hand with the power of words is the age old problem of wordiness in writing. Perhaps the most excellent textless book illustrating utter simplicity and yet maintaining depth of thought is *The Winner* by Kjell Ringi. In this story, two people meet. Each one in turn disguises himself from the other. With the disguises come fear and with fear comes weapons to defend themselves against one another. Each weapon increases in size until the ultimate weapon devours both people. The artist's use of small simple characters set against a large white page cannot help but emphasize the needlessness of extra words. Composition topics resulting from this story seem endless.

A similar use of simplicity is seen in Alfred Olschewski's *Winterbird*. Black and white drawings create the story of a bird walking on snow trying to flee from a cat. Thousands of birds come to the aid of their distressed friend and the cat flees. Simplicity of expression, strength through unity, and friendship are possible topics with this book.

When setting and mood are the topics in class, Guillermo Mordillo's *The Damp and Daffy Doings of a Daring Pirate Ship* is an excellent choice. The use of color to set mood is a triumph in this book. The artist creates an almost three-dimensional effect using colors. This book even has a moral at the end. Assignments here might involve rewriting a fable or writing a modern fable emphasizing moral, setting, and mood.

Point of view is best shown in Yutika Sugita's *My Friend Little John and Me*. What makes this story of a boy and dog so different is that it is told from the dog's point of view. Through the use of the eyes, the artist successfully conveys the feelings of the dog. This is a most important book

when trying to get students to recognize point of view and to get them to attempt writing from a different point of view. Simplicity is also a virtue of this book.

Finally, a book entitled *Changes, Changes* by Pat Hutchins illustrates a topic that is popular with composition teachers. Using the same shapes throughout the story, the artist places the shapes in different positions to create new objects. The composing process is certainly analogous here. Each student has the necessary words, but it is up to him to use his imagination to create the new objects.

I hope that English teachers will never give up the search for new workable approaches to teaching composition. Textless books offer a unique approach to the teaching of writing. They capitalize on individual response and imagination. These books lend themselves to both structured and unstructured methods of teaching composition. Fernando Krahn, in his introduction to the *Journeys of Sebastian*, says, "Thinking is when you go exploring in your head." Textless books help students to start this exploration and to write it down as they go along.

TRUTHSEEKER

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go . . .

—*John Donne, "Satire III"*

Truthseeker, yes, but not Truthseeker only
By indirections finds directions out:
Aimers with objects nearer and less lonely
Follow most deviously their questing snout:

God knows what fruitless turnings once were made
By poor Diogenes, a lantern in his hand!
And Galahad, Grail-seeking, got no aid
On any hairpin curve in all the land.

The prince who searched for charming Cinderella
Down winding alleys dogged his bit of Truth;
And Ponce de Leon, poor silly fella,
Went round and round and didn't find his youth.

And Ethan Brand meandered many seasons
To find the fearsome fact that he would know;
Even the snowflake pondered (with good reasons),
If down the rut or through the barn 'twould go.

Small marvel, then, if I, engrossed in teaching,
In wilds of Trial-and-Error live my day;
My bones beside some tarn I may leave bleaching.
But, really, is there any better way?

—*Elmer Brooks*

HUGH AGEE

THE WIRE GAME: Classroom Interaction for Oral and Written Communication

Classroom interaction is vital for so many precomposing activities in oral and written communication, and I have discovered in composition classes a very useful technique for overcoming the reserve which students unfamiliar with each other bring to these courses. I call it the wire game. Basically, it is an exercise in self-examination, creativity, perception, and analysis which I have borrowed from sensitivity training. The procedures are modified to suit the basic objectives of putting students at ease with each other and of minimizing the anxiety many of them feel as they contemplate having to put themselves on paper in the composing process.

I use for this activity discarded segments of thin, plastic-coated wire from telephone lines, clusters of which I have been able to obtain from friendly telephone repairmen. Each segment is 15 to 18 inches long and extremely flexible, the latter being a most important feature. The color of the plastic sheath varies, but color is significant in this exercise only if the individual chooses to make it so. Other kinds of wire (e.g., florists' wire) may be used as long as it has sufficient flexibility and is long enough for adequate expression.

As a basic procedure, I give each person a strand of wire on the first day we meet, asking everyone to shape his wire into whatever configuration he feels will make a statement about himself at that particular point in his life. That statement may express his feelings at the moment, or it may represent a larger, more inclusive comment on his goals, etc. I assure the class that there is no "right" response, and that no one should feel embarrassed. For that reason the teacher may participate in this activity and share his wire sculpture with the class in the process.

I then urge everyone to write a brief statement summarizing what he feels he has said about himself in the configuration. Where students have difficulty with written expression, an oral statement at the appropriate time is quite acceptable. No one should share his statement or talk about his wire sculpture prematurely, even though a great deal of interest builds as students look about to see what others have done. The length of time for this phase will vary according to the class; ideally, no one should feel intimidated by lack of time.

Once the configurations are complete and the statements ready, I pair each student with someone he knows little or nothing about. (In some classes students may know each other by name, but the activity still works as students express themselves in a new manner.) After exchanging configurations, each student studies his partner's sculpture and tries to decide what his partner seems to be saying about himself. This, too, may be put in writing, though it is not essential.

The partners do not share these reactions with each other at this time. Rather, each pair, in turn, introduces one another by name and shares with the larger group thoughts on each other as suggested by the

sculpture. Each student responds to the reaction by comparing his statement with his partner's perception of him. The similarity between the stated and perceived expression of self is generally high where students have been reasonably open and sincere. I hasten to add that because some statements may be very personal any student may feel free to decline to discuss his sculpture before the class. With very few exceptions, I have found students quite willing to take part in all phases of the wire game and enjoy it immensely.

Obviously, no one's life or mood or personality can be summed up in a wire sculpture, but this exercise can open many avenues of knowledge and understanding among students. It has the definite advantage of laying important groundwork for peer evaluation in written composition and for promoting a relaxed, congenial atmosphere for exercises in oral communication. It also helps develop a sense of audience that transcends the traditional classroom practice of students addressing themselves primarily to the teacher.

The variety of expression through strands of wire is, of course, endless. Certain traditional shapes may be anticipated, nevertheless. For example, a heart may reflect a love feeling; an upward spiral may suggest goals for the future and achievements in the past; a tight coil spring may suggest tension; a circle may suggest unity or a sense of completeness. I have seen flowers, smiles, or sun bursts suggesting happiness or contentment; body shapes reflecting concerns about height and weight; straight lines expressing feelings of certainty or determination; and various kinds of graphs showing high and low points in individual lives. Most students find it fascinating to express something of themselves in a nonverbal manner. Modeling clay may be used with similar results, although wire seems more unusual to most students.

I discovered that the wire may be used for additional activities in the composition class:

1. Create a story or situation in which a piece of wire is of the utmost importance.
2. Create a story or account in which the narrator *is* the piece of wire.
3. Make a list of all the possible uses of wire.
4. Shape your piece of wire in response to a song or poem.
5. Compare or contrast a piece of wire with some similar object, such as a spaghetti noodle, a shoe string, etc.
6. Examine and describe a piece of wire using all the senses.

Some of these activities are more appropriate for the middle school than for the high school; however, I have had very favorable results using the wire game at many levels, even with groups of teachers coming together on an inservice day to discuss the teaching of composition. Many have seen the possibilities in this activity and have reported success in their classes as well.

The wire game does promote group interaction; it does remind us that people perceive things similarly or in unlike manners according to the nature of the stimuli and to the experiences each of us brings to the event; it does promote introspection in a relatively nonthreatening way; and it does help us to look at others beyond a superficial glance.

Besides all that, it is an enjoyable experience. Our students need that kind of motivation in the composing process.

SHEILA A. SCHLAWIN

Writing In And About Our Town

Invent a town and live in it for a year! That's what we did in an eleventh grade English class a couple of years ago. I had heard of creative writing classes inventing a town, and I wondered how the idea would work for a class of College Preparatory 2 students. (We had tracking in that school; CP2 students were the third track; Advanced Placement and CP1 were the two top tracks.)

When, on the first day of school in September, I suggested that we invent a town, the incredulous stares of the students gave me no indication that we would still be living in the town the last week of school in June.

Luckily, I had the reputation of a somewhat weird teacher, but OK if you went along with her (a useful reputation at times), and the students rather cautiously began to explore the possibility. By the second day we were deeply involved in such questions as how large the town should be, and what the topographical features and main industries were.

As we were beginning to reach agreement on the main features of the town the third day, one of the students remarked, "If we're going to write about this town, we ought to have a map of it, or we'll never remember all this."

Beautiful! We got large sheets of paper and magic markers from the art department, pushed back the chairs, got down on the floor, taped the sheets together, and soon had a large wall-sized map of the town. Not only had we placed the industries (two), the utilities, the stores, the drive-ins, the schools, but we had also chosen where we wanted to live and had inked in our residences. The map was taped to the wall of the classroom and stayed there until June. Much to my surprise, the only additions to the map were those we agreed on, plus a few residences surreptitiously penciled in by students from other classes who wanted to get in the picture.

Now, what did we do with our town?

We wrote descriptions of places and scenes, various students taking responsibility for different areas.

We described our own residences and families in the town, some resembling our real residences, some not.

We invented characters and wrote incidents involving the characters. I knew the characters were becoming alive when students began borrowing each other's characters for subsequent incidents. Sometimes characters gave their opinions on issues of the day.

We produced a newspaper with news of the present-day town, letters to the editor, fashions, sports, editorials, even comic strips and cartoons.

We produced a newspaper that might have been published at the time of the novel we were reading *(My Antonia)*. That project involved time in the library to find out what was happening in the nation and the world at the time, what the fashions were, what sports were played, what

entertainments there might have been, whether our industries could have existed then, and what newspapers of the time looked like.

We invented a town history, our stipulation being that it had to be plausible and consistent with the way towns in the geographical area we had selected were founded. Again, the invented history required some search in the library for real history.

We discussed the environmental, social, and economic problems that beset our town and tried to think of solutions. No, our town was not Utopia, although it could have been if we had invented it that way.

Sometimes characters from stories we were reading visited our town; occasionally an author came on a lecture tour.

In short, the ideas for writing based on "our town" were limited only by the imaginations of the students and their teacher.

Although the creation of the town was intended as a basis for composition, it turned out that it was also an indirect basis for value clarification and for psychological projection throughout the year.

Our town provided three great advantages—an interest in writing, an interested audience for each other's writing, and the growth of a class into a community. After all—we were close neighbors!

EDITORIAL POLICY:

Indiana English Journal publishes articles of interest to teachers of English and the language arts. Manuscripts concerning such areas as reading, language, literature, composition, creative writing, and the media are welcomed, particularly if they have implications for curriculum and methods of teaching.

Each issue will normally treat a single theme, which will be announced in advance in the *Indiana English Journal* and *The Indiana Scene*.

Mini-reviews of recent books and teaching materials (no more than 250 words each) are invited, as are letters to the editor. Poems are used as fillers. An occasional work of fiction may be published if it directly relates to the interests of teachers and to the theme for the issue.

Manuscripts should be typed and double-spaced. Footnotes should be incorporated within the text whenever possible. Manuscripts and related correspondence should be sent to James S. Mullican, Department of English and Journalism, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809. To insure a manuscript's return, please enclose a self-addressed envelope with return postage clipped to it.